

Mistakes in Teaching Ethics



DR. JAMES H. TONER

HAVING HAD THE unique opportunity of teaching ethics at the Air War College at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, for seven years—preceded by 13 years of experience teaching at a military college, one year at Notre Dame, plus service as an Army officer and as a baseball coach in college and high school—I have probably committed most of the mistakes I outline below. In writing this short piece, I am not trying to point an accusing finger at any person, group, or institution. In fact, readers will recognize that what I label mistakes can be intelligently defended by someone else. Moreover, what I present here is not necessarily approved or endorsed by the Air War College, Air University, the Air Force, or, in fact, anyone else in this hemisphere.

I simply cannot imagine anyone's staking out a position against ethics or against teaching ethics. Indeed, throughout history, almost all aggressors have shot back; that is, they represent themselves as being the victims of aggression rather than the perpetrators of it. So it is with ethics. The most unethical people, groups, and institutions enjoy

being seen as paragons of virtue. Were the devil himself to appear, I suspect that he would choose the guise of a saint. So we can dispose of one notion—namely, that some people do not want ethics to be taught. To claim that position is rather like being opposed to motherhood, apple pie, and baseball. Some people may not like any of those three things, but, customarily, they don't argue vigorously against them.

Whose ethics will we teach? We could spend a great deal of time debating this topic. Some people argue that, in a multicultural country, we are hard pressed to delineate one understanding of ethics. One can advance a number of arguments to buttress that contention, all of them fallacious, most of them obviously foolish: because we have different religions or none at all; because we are different colors; because we have conflicting political viewpoints; because some of us like chocolate, some vanilla, and some strawberry. None of these points makes any negative impact on this fundamental truth: Human beings generally know right from wrong, honor from shame, virtue from vice.

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People entering our forces today already have the power of ethical judgment. We do not have to reinvent the ethical wheel.

Mistake Number One

We sometimes suppose, as teachers of military ethics, that, despairing of today's youth, we must "build from the bottom up." We sometimes suppose that our E-1/O-1 candidates don't know that they don't know. We think that they are so estranged from truth and goodness that we have to teach them the basics, the rudiments, the essentials of the ethical life. My point, simply put, is this: If the people we receive into today's armed forces are the ethical cretins we sometimes make them out to be, our prospects of enlightening them in basic training or boot camp—and thereafter in "ethics refresher training"—are slim to none. I believe¹ that we human beings know—innately, naturally, and inherently—the difference between good and bad, truth and falsity, right and wrong. Let's suppose that we do not know such differences. If everything we know about ethics is the product only of teaching and of experience, how is it that closed political systems and totalitarianism have been unable to create the "perfect" citizen? Can it be that despite a flood tide of perverted propaganda and egregious education, people can somehow—seemingly miraculously—tell what is right from what is wrong?

I think so—at least I hope so. If there isn't a spark of eternal goodness somewhere in the heart, mind, and soul of people, what is it that we can appeal to when we talk to gang members and thugs, to political charlatans, and to military monsters who apparently recognize no "good"? I have studied history and politics too long to be quixotic and "idealistic." If I see a spark of good in people, I have lived and

learned long enough to know that there is ample evil around as well. Good ethics and wise politics agree in this: A good system, whether political or military, encourages the best within us and discourages the worst within us. If we assume that people entering today's military forces are ethically blighted and benighted, our ethics instruction will fail, for it will be too condescending, patronizing, simplistic, and imperious. **First correction: People entering our forces today already have the power of ethical judgment. We do not have to reinvent the ethical wheel.**

Mistake Number Two

Imagine that you have begun to teach a college-level course in algebra. Believing that your students are mathematical illiterates, you begin by saying, "We must all learn the following: one and one are two; two and two are four; four and four are eight"; and so on. With very rare exceptions, most students beginning a college-level course in algebra will have some understanding of algebra—although it will of course vary from student to student. The good instructor develops and builds upon the base that already exists.²

Just as it is a mistake to assume that people have no ethical judgment, so is it a mistake to assume that they have superior ethical judgment. The US military for many years has collectively argued that leadership can be taught; at the same time, I think I have never heard anyone say that leadership can be taught regardless of intellect and instinct. To develop leaders, we develop and focus the human potential of our people. So it is, exactly, with ethics education. None of us, not one, is ever done with ethics education—until the moment of death. We know that when we fail to exercise our bodies, we begin to lose our physical "edge." Why should we think it is any different with learning? Our ethical development is lifelong; it is a process, never a product; it is never "completed."

But the fact that we do not know everything does not mean that we do not know some things. Practically without exception,

people understand what “fairness” is all about.³ If their understanding of right and wrong depends ultimately upon someone’s preaching or professorial eloquence to acquaint them with the idea of fairness, all is lost. We do not create the idea of fairness; people already know it. But we do develop it and build upon it. In education, we must never underestimate the student’s intelligence; and we must never overestimate his or her learning. If the first major mistake of military ethics education is to assume that trainees know hardly anything, the second major mistake is to assume that they know a great deal. In a word, most knowledge of ethics is inchoate, which my dictionary defines as “not yet clearly or completely formed or organized.” Second correction: Our task as teachers of military ethics is to impart some sense of order, some overarching scheme of discipline, to the ethical sense and awareness that already exist.

Mistake Number Three

Have you heard it said—I have, many times!—that ethics education is the task and property of the chaplain? It is his or her job to teach ethics; it is the commander’s task, well, to command. But if a commander is bereft of ethical sense—if he or she is without conscience—that commander fails before issuing one order, because the commander is and must be a model of excellence. Competence without character is perversion.⁴

In the military, ethics will be caught more of ten than it is taught. I mean nothing at all against chaplains, but they are, after all, expected to preach ethically. But when the boss—from O-10 to the most junior E-4 or E-5 noncommissioned officer—acts ethically, one deed is worth a thousand words. When I tell the kids on my baseball team never to use nonprescription drugs, they expect me to say that; but if a former thug-turned-good-citizen says that, his testimony will likely carry more weight. Imagine measuring the “ethical fitness” of a command by assessing its chaplains’ atten-

dance at church. It would be a useless “measure of merit.” There is simply no doubt that organizations improve ethically when the boss is a gentleman (or a lady).

The fact that the boss is ethical does not mean that the organization will be a moral exemplar; and the fact that the boss is corrupt does not mean that everyone in the unit will be infected with ethical disease.

Everyone understands what the Uniform Code of Military Justice says about “conduct unbecoming.” But if ethics is to be taught well, commanders at all levels have to “walk the talk”—current jargon for “setting the example.” Third correction: The fact that the boss is ethical does not mean that the organization will be a moral exemplar; and the fact that the boss is corrupt does not mean that everyone in the unit will be infected with ethical disease. But isn’t there some common sense here? If people desire an ethical organization, they should choose ethical leaders. It is not a guarantee of ethical success, but it is a much better bet than choosing ethical slackers as leaders.

Mistake Number Four

Commanders have the responsibility to “model ethics.” But we must not expect them, necessarily, to present formal ethics lectures in the base theater or, more particularly, to be conscience stricken by every act and every order. I must be careful how I put this, so please read slowly here, lest I give the wrong impression. Commanders must be ethical people, but they are not chaplains. Commanders do not exist, principally, to save souls; they exist to deter, wage, and prepare to wage war, as well as to kill people and break things.⁵ Military people sometimes

have to do difficult deeds; in so doing, they risk their own (and their people's) lives—and souls. A commander cannot be so paralyzed by corrosive fear of doing the wrong thing that he or she does nothing.

We simply cannot have commanders who become catatonic at the prospect of making an ethical misjudgment.

“Don’t just stand there; do something!” is an old, and I think largely correct, leadership axiom. Sometimes commanders will make mistakes. Some commanders will push people too hard or demand too much or set standards too high. Chaplains counsel; commanders lead and decide. Fourth correction: Not every word and not every action are deeply troubling moral quandaries. We simply cannot have commanders who become catatonic at the prospect of making an ethical misjudgment. A commander must have the physical and moral courage to act in a timely and decisive manner, usually before all the facts about a situation are known. The commander does the best that he or she can reasonably be expected to do. The mission is attempted and accomplished, and the commander's actions and orders are then subject to professional scrutiny.

The commander knows that his or her actions will be—and should be—subject to review, but that knowledge cannot and must not inhibit vigorous prosecution of a path of action that seems wise at the moment of decision. The commander who, at that juncture, is seized by spasms of nail-biting self-doubt and by overwhelming ethical uncertainties is, quite simply, a failure. Chaplains—and scholars like me—have the wonderful benefit of hindsight and of unhurried reflection in the privacy of offices or in the safety of library carrels. Commanders must

act—often now! I am not saying that commanders ought to disregard ethical considerations, but I am saying that they may have to take actions, the likely result of which will be ethically questionable.

Let me put it this way: Ordering a bombing raid is always wrong; the raid will almost certainly kill people, which is evil. But the question is this: Is there a greater evil which that bombing raid will likely help to eradicate? The GI who killed a German soldier in World War II ought to feel bad about it; his bullets took someone's life. But did that US soldier, in killing his enemy on the field of battle, help to end the horrors of the Nazi regime? If so, it seems to me that his action on the battlefield is, however regrettable, still necessary. This is not to contend that everything can or should be judged by its outcome or consequence,⁶ but there can be no doubt that, insofar as we can discern the likely results of our actions, we must consider them in determining what we should or should not do. I am not suggesting that this kind of moral calculus is enough to ensure wise judgment;⁷ it is, however, necessary if not of itself sufficient.

Someone once said that there are two kinds of people—those who make simple things complex and those who make complex things simple. Military ethics is not a simple matter, which leads to another mistake.

Mistake Number Five

It is very nice to think that commanders can present lectures about ethics in base theaters, thus showing “command interest.” After all, someone can present a canned “briefing” to the boss so that he or she can, in turn, “train” his or her people in “core values.” I have never flown an airplane in my life. But I am literate and reasonably intelligent. Why then can't I be given a canned briefing and serve as an instructor at a pilot or navigator school? The very idea is nonsense. I have no knowledge, no experience, and hardly any reference points to use as teaching aids. But I would have the slides! Why is it that so little in the Air Force can be taught unless it's on

“slides”? Can it be because speakers are scared half to death to talk straight to an audience, speaking from mind and heart—that is, to teach? Teachers—or commanders—who need canned talks, beautifully prepared color slides, and other pyrotechnics may well be good pilots and even good leaders, but they are, by the very fact of employing canned lectures, incompetent as teachers. The idea that every commander is an ethics teacher is absolutely correct; the idea that every teacher is thereby a competent classroom instructor is absolutely wrong.

The principal rule of medicine and of teaching is, First, do no harm. What will any reasonably bright airman or young lieutenant think when he or she sees the boss mumbling through some mandatory training about core values? Maybe the boss can interject a story or joke or anecdote that will enlighten and enliven the discussion. But because the material is formally different from what they have dealt with in their education and training, commanders are out of their depth. We do not expect them to deliver lectures on the anatomical elements of physical fitness; we do expect them to be reasonably fit. Why, then, do we expect commanders to deliver (even canned) briefings on ethics (while still expecting and demanding that they be “ethically fit”)?

Fifth correction: In teaching courses on military ethics, I want students to read good sources about military ethics and not to assume, necessarily, that the commander is an expert in the field of teaching military ethics. Of course the commander should impart his or her blessing to the enterprise; of course the commander must let it be known that ethical action and ethics instruction are vital to the command; of course the commander must be prepared to discuss ethical implications of actions and orders. But it is nonsense to think that commanders, however imbued they may be with Little Blue Books, official slides, or colorful briefing charts, are thereby magically transformed into instructors of ethics. There are materials, resources, and people frequently outside local commands that ought to be

Get out of the way and let teachers teach. Monitor, sure; sit in, of course; challenge and criticize, certainly. But do not substitute “approved curriculum” for the spontaneity of lively, creative, dynamic teaching by someone deeply in love with the subject and with an almost desperate need to explain it to others! . . . Good teachers create good curricula; good curricula, of themselves, cannot make good teachers.

trusted with ethics instruction rather than depending upon commanders to serve as instructors in a discipline about which, formally, they may know little or nothing. (That, again, is not in the least to excuse them from ethical action and reflection.)

A major problem with ethics education is that it can not be crammed into neat compartments and nice-sounding, desired learning outcomes. I wholly agree that there is a moral literature with which people ought to be familiar, and I completely agree that knowledge of certain religious, philosophical, historical, and literary sources can help us all find our way through the ethical jungle. But there is no “magic bullet”—no always-certain ethical compass. We must teach moral reasoning, not just “core values” or “ethical check lists.”

Mistake Number Six

At so many levels in the Air Force, we make the mistake of thinking that curricula make teachers. We talk endlessly about levels of learning, “desired learning outcomes,” and other such drivel that hardly anyone at any reputable university takes seriously. I do not argue that good curricula are unimportant; of course they are. But good teachers create

good curricula; good curricula, of themselves, cannot make good teachers.

People who want to reduce ethics education to “training”—who want to reduce ethics to slogans or shibboleths; who want commanders to teach moral reasoning (beyond their critical responsibility of always setting the right example); who insist on Little Blue Books, checklists, desired learning outcomes, and pretty visual aids—will not help improve ethics education.

Remember the great teacher you had in, say, the fifth grade. Now, quickly—name the textbook he or she used that so impressed you. Of course we learn from materials! But how much more do we learn from people who choose materials—fair, organized, diligent, enthusiastic, creative, reflective people? Give me someone with a minor or marginal interest in a subject, and I will then send that person to teacher training. Now give me someone with passionate interest in the same material and with a commitment to teach it to someone else but without formal teacher training. I will bet, in every instance, that the second teacher will be far superior to the first. I don't refer merely to teaching, say, philosophy. Watch a good mechanic explain something about an automobile to someone he is trying to teach. If that mechanic loves his subject and has some facility and flair for instruction, his teaching will be far superior to the dull, desiccated instruction that passes for learning in some quarters.

We still occasionally hear nonsense about “active” and “passive” learning as though listening to a dynamic lecture from a fervent speaker who is, in fact, thinking out loud and thus modeling learning, were anything other than “active learning.” We can call the occa-

sional pooled ignorance of what passes for a seminar “active learning” if we choose to delude ourselves. But most serious scholars I know relish listening to good lectures; they listen, they think, they challenge mentally (or orally), and they actively learn!

Sixth correction: Get out of the way and let teacher teach. Monitor, sure; sit in, of course; challenge and criticize, certainly. But do not substitute “approved curriculum” for the spontaneity of lively, creative, dynamic teaching by someone deeply in love with the subject and with an almost desperate need to explain it to others! We must not fear dynamic teaching, and the kind of teaching-by-committee so often used in military circles may drive out precisely the kind of inspired instruction needed—especially in ethics.

People who want to reduce ethics education to “training”—who want to reduce ethics to slogans or shibboleths; who want commanders to teach moral reasoning (beyond their critical responsibility of always setting the right example); who insist on Little Blue Books, checklists, desired learning outcomes, and pretty visual aids—will not help improve ethics education. We must realize that men and women enter the Air Force with some fundamental understanding of right and wrong; that there is still a need to deepen that understanding and to provide for it an Air Force context; that leaders of competence are also leaders of character who teach by deed, if not necessarily by word; that leaders must be able to act in circumstances of moral ambiguity when simple slogans offer them precious little advice; that the ability to reason well morally is critically important; and that using traditional military training techniques in ethics instruction will not work.

One can train a rifleman or a pilot. One does not train someone to be ethical. Here, in a nutshell, is why ethics training is an oxymoron. We can speak forever about “integrity,” “excellence in all we do,” and “service before self.” We can put those words on calendars, desks, and walls. But when we have to apply those words, what do they mean? What do they mean to the lieutenant colonel preparing officer performance ratings (OPR) on

three fine young captains? Does the colonel inflate the OPRs, knowing that these captains, although very good, are perhaps not the best in the Air Force? Does the colonel tell the absolute truth, thus possibly wounding the careers of three fine officers? Or does the colonel reason that service before self here means that loyalty to the Air Force requires suspension of his or her own very high standards and a little leniency on the OPRs for the benefit of three fine officers? What does “excellence” mean here?

In situations of moral ambiguity, there is no manual, there are no check lists, there is no consultant to resolve the difficulty. One is left

with one’s religious and philosophical convictions, with one’s education, with one’s service culture and character, with one’s sense of honor and shame and of right and wrong, to do what must be done. Sometimes there are difficult decisions to be made. In those circumstances, I do not want simply rules or simply considerations of outcomes or simply examination of pressing circumstances or simply patterns of thought; I want all of them, considered as prudentially as possible by a man or woman who has learned to reason wisely and well. Such people are not produced quickly or easily or even commonly. But without them, we will have no Air Force worthy of respect. □

Notes

1. I mean that I literally believe. See Rom. 2:14–15.
2. And so it is with ethics. I concede that there are “ethical idiots”: people so twisted and evil that they have no ethical base. In this world there are monsters—and devils.
3. I do not want to turn this into an academic article by having long lists of readings. Let me cite just two: C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Collier, 1955); and James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

4. At the same time, great character without competence is dangerous. Is the surgeon who is removing your appendix today just “a great fellow” but not so hot as a surgeon?
5. I am leaving out of consideration here other duties as assigned, such as noncombatant evacuation operations.
6. This is known as teleological (or utilitarian) ethics.
7. When we discuss “core values,” we too often forget what the real core values are: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. See Plato’s *Laws* (I, 631); or *Wisd. of Sol.* 8:7.

Experience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the government’s purposes are beneficent. Men born to freedom are naturally alert to repel invasion of their liberty by evil-minded rulers. The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding.

—Louis D. Brandeis